



Rafayel



Steam
A Unique Vermillion

+ LOVE AND DEEPSPACE +





01 | Unfinished Work

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Thomas's art exhibition begins in a week. Rafayel's art covers almost all of the walls except for one. Thomas announced that, on the opening day, Rafayel's magnum opus would be there. However, until then, no one can see it, not even his sponsors. Of course, only Thomas knows that Rafayel's magnum opus is still...

He finally finds Rafayel in the storage room after running around for a long time. Thomas stops to catch his breath. He wipes the sweat off his forehead with one hand

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and airs himself with his collar. "You're here. Not going to take a bath today?" Rafayel doesn't spare Thomas a glance, his eyes focused on the "building" in front of him. It's a fortress made from thousands of identical pieces of fish bone, each tower a different height.

"I knew you'd bother me, so I locked the bathroom door from the inside. But then I forgot to go in." Rafayel weighs the small bone in his hand, thinks for a bit, then places it on the top left corner of the "fortress."

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Thomas furrows his brow. "And the key?"

"I don't know."

"Fish brain," Thomas mutters. He takes note of what Rafayel is building. "You haven't even finished your painting yet. Why are you making this?"

"Maybe it's because I can't paint right now?"

Feeling anxious, Thomas feels any work of Rafayel's is a masterpiece. He takes a step. "This is pretty good! Why don't we use this as your final piece? People can also see our great painter's installation art."

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Rafayel glanced at him. "You want me to rebuild this at the exhibition? It's two thousand pieces. I don't have that much time."

Thomas deflates like a balloon. He massages his temples and says, "The sponsors called me again today. They're very worried about the situation regarding the final piece... I know you don't care about these things, but it's not just about you. It's also about my reputation. I can't... Ahem, we can't mess this up."

Rafayel picks up a large fish bone, holds it

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in the air, then puts it back on the table. He focuses on the "building," completely ignoring Thomas.

Seeing Rafayel ignore him, Thomas becomes exasperated and says, "You've been painting for a while. Why don't you let me take a look?"

Inside the studio, a painting as tall as the wall is covered in wet paint, filling the air with the smell of minerals.

Thomas fancies himself as someone who understands art. But if he's being honest

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with himself, he can't tell what's missing from this piece. It's already good enough. Thomas snaps back from his daze and asks, "Isn't this already perfect?"

"It's missing a color." Rafayel massages his temples, looking distressed. "Without that, this painting isn't complete."

"Is one color really important? It's already pretty stunning... Why don't we just display this first, then add the color after?" Thomas withdraws himself from the painting, his mind filled with many thoughts.

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"Paintings I haven't finished will never be released to the public." Rafayel glances at Thomas's expression. "Don't even think about it. If you move this painting, I'll burn it."

Thomas purses his lips. "You're a man of your word... Fine, but there has to be a deadline. How about two days? Or three? I can't give you any more than that."

Closing his eyes, Rafayel nods.

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02 | Missing Color


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Three days pass in the blink of an eye. Thomas still hasn't heard from Rafayel. With no other alternatives, he returns to the island. On the beach not so far away, a thick branch dances across the sand. The man holding it stands up from time to time to look at the drawing.

"I've said it before, and I'll say it again. Everything is ready! Why would I lie to you?" Thomas shifts his phone from left to right, then right to left. "You know his temper. No one can see the painting until the opening of the exhibition. You're all

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the same..."

Ending his call with the sponsor's manager, Thomas walks toward the man drawing on the beach.

"It's been three days!" Thomas says when he's close to Rafayel. "Mr. Artist, we have four days left until the exhibition! What are you doing?!"

"Did you go blind already?" Rafayel stands up and props the branch up with his right hand. At his feet, a drawing of the sea is in the sand.

"If only you drew this at the exhibition.

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02 | Missing Color

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"What's the point of having it here?" After admiring his work, Thomas quickly asks, "Did you find that color?"

Rafayel slams the stick into the sand twice. "If I did, I wouldn't be drawing here," he says, slightly frustrated.

Sighing, Thomas puts his hands on his waist. "Let's go to my friend's pigment factory. There are thousands of colors there. You're bound to find the one you want."

"No," Rafayel says. "Those have been chosen countless times by other people. I

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will never let them be in my paintings."

Thomas sighs. "I knew you'd be like this. I wouldn't have suggested this if I could afford to wait any longer."

Chuckling, he continues in a wistful tone, "You were like this when we first met."

Looking up at the endless blue sea, Thomas closes his eyes. "I remember, back then, I compared myself to you..."

Thomas recalls that time when he was still passionate about art.

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03 | Passionate Colors

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At a charity event, his painting just so happened to be displayed alongside Rafayel's. Thomas had heard of Rafayel before. He thought he stood a chance against him. If his painting sold for a price higher than Rafayel's, then he would become famous overnight. With that thought, Thomas went to the exhibit early. This time, their works were quite similar in tone. Comparing the two, he noticed Rafayel's was more unique, yet he didn't want to admit it. Thomas always thought his work was better than everyone else's.

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03 | Passionate Colors

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But those who approached the two paintings only admired Rafayel's and ignored Thomas's.

Thomas reassured himself. *These people only cared about Rafayel's name. They didn't know anything about the true meaning of art.*

Near the end of the exhibit, an old man approached the paintings. Thomas recognized this old man as a famous art collector. *Finally, someone who knew art.* When the old man stopped in front of the two paintings, his eyes looked only at

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03 | Passionate Colors

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Rafayel's piece. "Such a passionate color... Only Mr. Rafayel could convey emotions like this."

Thomas was consumed by jealousy. "Mr. Thomas's painting is pretty good too, right?"

The old man took his glasses off. He glanced at Thomas's painting, waved his hand, and said, "The red's off."

Thomas's painting wasn't sold for a good price that night. It was that same night he decided to "let himself" visit Rafayel.

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04 | Carefree Painter

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Rafayel only let him in when he heard Thomas was also an artist. That was the first time Thomas met him. Thomas wanted to have an artistic discussion with Rafayel about colors, but Rafayel didn't seem interested. He just sat at his desk, mixing colors in paper cups.

Thomas asked if he knew his painting sold at a high price.


Without lifting his head, Rafayel asked, "Which one?"

"The one at the charity event."

"Oh."

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At his lukewarm response, Thomas was confused. "Do you not want to know how much you sold it for?"

"As long as it benefits the charity, I don't care how much money it makes," Rafayel said, then mumbled about the paint lacking something. He picked up his brush and looked for some color on his palette. Recalling the old man's critique, Thomas asked, "What brand of paint do you use?" As if he had never heard of that word before, Rafayel finally looked up at Thomas. "Brand?"

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Worried that Rafayel wouldn't tell him, Thomas decided to lay out his choice of paints first. "Madeline, Bailey, Curio... Those are the brands I use. I'll trade some with you."

Rafayel stirred the contents of the paper cup with a small brush. It took him a while to say, "Thanks. But I can make it myself." Thomas took a deep breath. *Is this the attitude of a famous artist?* "How did you make the red in your painting then?" he asked.

Rafayel made a line on a piece of paper

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with the paint from the paper cup.

Satisfied, he looked up at Thomas again.

"Are you here because you wanna learn from me?"

Hearing this, Thomas felt a little irritated.

But he knew that to learn the truth, he had to let go of his pride. "If you tell me, I'll make you even more famous."

Rafayel took the paint he mixed to his canvas. "I don't paint for fame."

Thomas returned to the present, opening his eyes to gaze at how the waves lapped

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the sand. He feels sentimental.

"After that, I studied business to become your manager. To be honest with you, I was stunned the first time I saw your work. I couldn't believe that someone as talented as you existed... So, I believe in your talent. You wouldn't be stopped by artist's block. You'd—"

Turning back, Thomas's words stop in his throat.

Rafayel's figure moves further and further away, eventually becoming a small dot in the distance.

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05 | Drastic Measures

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With two days left until the exhibition, Thomas decides to take matters into his own hands. Darkness covers the sea and the island, and the studio is lit up by the moonlight filtering through the window. Thomas sneaks inside. He glances around, and when he doesn't see any signs of Rafayel, he fixes his gaze on the giant painting leaning against the wall. His footsteps are silent as he moves toward it. He puts on the gloves he brought with him, kneels, and tries to pick up the painting.

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Right at this moment, someone comes out from the shadows. The air is filled with the sound of a match being lit.

Thomas shouts, "W-what are you doing with that match?!"

Rafayel glares at Thomas. "If that painting moves even one centimeter, I will light it on fire."

"Okay, okay! Fine! Don't do it!" Thomas takes several steps back.

Rafayel, match in hand, stands near the painting. His gaze doesn't leave Thomas. With the match so close to the painting,

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Thomas's heart almost jumps out of his chest.

Hurriedly, he says, "I moved it at most nine millimeters! It hasn't moved a centimeter! You can see for yourself!"

Rafayel's gaze shifts, but he doesn't look at the painting. Rather, he stares at Thomas's feet. "Move. You're stepping on my conch."

The wooden board Rafayel has slept on since noon rests in the corner. Thomas turns on the light and moves it aside. "How can you even sleep on it? Are you seriously

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doing this just so you can guard your painting?"

The lights flicker on. Thomas notices what Rafayel is holding: a conch he's never seen before.

He clicks his tongue, puts his arms on his waist, and glares at Rafayel. "There are two days left until the exhibition, and you're here trying seafood?"

Rafayel looks at Thomas for a few moments before he says, "Do you think of nothing else other than eating nature's creations when you see them?"

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Thomas takes a moment to think. "You want to use it as paint!"

"Yup." Rafayel wipes the conch with the utmost care. "The color I need might be in here."

Thomas, after a moment of shock, grabs Rafayel's arm. "Then what are you waiting for?! Hurry up and start painting!"

Rafayel pulls his arm away and says, "I can't paint right now. It'll take me at least three days to get the paint out."

"Three days?!" Thomas felt as though he had been struck by lightning. Taking deep

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breaths, he asks, "Is it possible to extract the color in one day?"

Rafayel pats Thomas's shoulder. "Nope."

Excitement fades from Thomas's face.

On the night before the exhibition, Thomas calls Rafayel for the tenth time but to no avail. He takes a deep breath. He knew he'd be like this. Thankfully, Thomas has a plan. It's not the greatest plan, but at this rate, he has to give it a go.

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06 | A Unique Legend

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It's been three days since the end of the exhibition. A mountain of conches sits in the corner of the studio, leading up to an assortment of paints. Pieces of conch shells are scattered across the floor.

Rafayel stands in front of the painting with a brush. In his left hand, a roughly thumb-sized blotch of color stands out among his colorful palette.

Thomas drifts into Rafayel's studio with a smile. He sits at the coffee table and pours himself a cup of coffee. Glancing at Rafayel, he says, still smiling, "You don't

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need to keep painting. The exhibition is over."

Rafayel doesn't turn around. He drags his brush across the painting.

"I hung a frame on the wall, gave it a strange name, and called it a day.

Everyone who came said it was the pinnacle of art! Who knew that a magnum opus could be so easily replaced with a frame? Maybe I still have some artistic talent in me." Seeing Rafayel ignoring him, Thomas's excitement fades.

Putting down his coffee, Thomas goes up

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to Rafayel and looks at his painting. There are a few more touches of reddish purple in Rafayel's painting. It's the same bright color that's on his palette.

Thomas furrows his brow. "Is this the color you've been looking for?"

"Yes," Rafayel replies.

Thomas takes a step back to take in the whole painting, then he moves closer. "I can't tell the difference between this and the claret violet from the factories."

Rafayel looks at him, speechless.

Thomas glances at the conch shells nearby

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and asks, "Did you extract the color from those?"

"Yeah. It's called Tyrian purple. It took ten thousand conches to get one gram. It's a completely different color from claret violet. You can't tell the difference, Mr. Manager?"

Thomas scratches his head. "Tyrian purple. Right. I know, I know."

Decades of art history have long since faded from Thomas's mind, but he vaguely remembers that Tyrian purple is a shade more precious than gold, used only by

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ancient royal families.

"But this color isn't rare anymore," Thomas says. *After all, technology is so advanced now.*

"It is rare though." Rafayel dabs his paintbrush and paints another stroke onto the painting. "Do you remember the vermillion you were looking for so many years ago?"

Thomas doesn't turn around. "It's been so many years. I gave up looking for it.

Besides, no matter how much I try, I could never mix a color as great as yours." He

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snorts. "A unique vermillion... Does that even exist?"

"Of course, it does," Rafayel says.

"Vermillion is a super rare color in ancient times. You should know."

"Well, yes, because the process back then wasn't as developed, and they didn't have the technology. They could only use bugs to make that color, so they'd need to take into account the cost of catching them and storing the materials. It's a very expensive process, so of course, it was rare." Thomas continues to calculate the total cost.

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"It being labor-intensive is one thing, but that's not the reason it's rare." Adding another stroke to the painting, Rafayel continues, "An insect can only give so much red to a painter's work. The vermillion nowadays can be easily synthesized with chemicals."

Thomas doesn't understand Rafayel's point. "Isn't that great, though? More people can paint now."

"More paintings have the same pigment, made at some factory at the same time, with the same chemicals and formulas,"

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Rafayel says. "No matter how much these people mix or tweak their pigments, they will always be confined to a set of rules. The color they make no longer comes from a unique bug. Just like how claret violet doesn't come from a unique conch."

With that, Thomas finally understands. The works of the painters in the days of yore are priceless because of the scarcity of their paintings. No one can reproduce their works, which makes them unique. There's nothing more precious than being one of a kind in this world. The same goes

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for color.

With the last smear of Tyrian purple, Rafayel puts away his brush and looks at Thomas. "This is the unique color I found." Thomas is dumbfounded. He looks back at Rafayel's painting, Tyrian purple and all, and it does seem a little different. Thomas can't tell what exactly had changed, but he knows this will be one of the most precious paintings in the world.

A few months later, Rafayel's painting is displayed in a grand exhibition.

A young and aspiring artist stands in front

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of the artwork and sneers, "They say the most fantastical part of this piece is the reddish purple. But I don't see the difference between this and the one I mix with normal paints."

After sending a businessman away with a smile, Thomas frowns.

He walks up to the painter, straightens his posture, and says, "Let me tell you, sir. This painting before you, with that reddish purple, is painted by the one-and-only Mr. Rafayel. He extracted this unique color from ten thousand conches, completely

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different from the manufactured one in your painting. That's what makes this shade fantastical, and that's one of the reasons why Mr. Rafayel is legendary."

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